

Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness

On-Site Needs Assessment

Final Report



BEDS Code	530600010011
School Name	Lincoln Elementary School
School Address	2 South Robinson, Schenectady NY 12304
District Name	Schenectady City School District
Principal	Job Thomas
Dates of Visit	February 26-28, 2019



Purpose Of The Visit

This school was identified as needing additional support by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). Because of this identification, NYSED arranged for an Integrated Intervention Team (IIT) to visit the school. The visit is intended to help the school identify areas of need that are making long-term success a challenge and provide several visible Quick Wins that can be accomplished and demonstrate the school's commitment to improvement.

The report provides a critical lens to help the school best focus its efforts.

School Performance

New York State uses multiple indicators to determine the identification status of schools across the state. For each of these indicators, schools receive a number of 1 (lowest), 2, 3, or 4 (highest) that corresponds with how the school performed in relation to either other schools and/or performance targets. More information about how these levels are determined can be found at: <http://www.nysed.gov/accountability/essa-accountability-designation-materials>

The most recent results for the "All Students" group at the school are as follows:

Elementary/Middle School Performance Indicators

Composite Performance Achievement Level	Student Growth Level	Combined Composite and Student Growth Level	English Language Proficiency Level	Average ELA and Math Academic Progress Level	Chronic Absenteeism Level
1	1	1	2	1	2

Lincoln Elementary School serves 326 students in grades pre-kindergarten to five.

Information About The Visit

- The visit was led by an Outside Educational Expert (OEE) and a representative from NYSED. The team also included a district representative.
- The team visited classrooms 27 times, seeing a total of 17 classrooms during the visit.
- The OEE visited five classrooms with the principal during the visit.
- Team members conducted interviews with students, staff, and parents.
- Team members examined documents provided by the school, including curriculum maps, lesson plans, schoolwide data, and student work.
- In advance of the visit, 14 staff members (35 percent) completed a DTSDE pre-visit survey conducted by NYSED.

Successes Within The School That The School Should Build Upon

1. The principal, who is new to the school this year, led a team of staff to change the school's approach to discipline and student support by adopting a pro-active approach, rather than a rapid response intervention strategy. By cutting out reactive responses through launching daily rounds to check in with dozens of students who are known to be struggling with social and emotional challenges, staff are working to anticipate and respond to potential problems before they become crises. Staff stated that by being proactive, they are offering more students access to a learning environment characterized by calm and order. The principal shared with the Integrated Intervention Team (IIT) that there are now fewer student disruptions, which has resulted in an increase in his ability to attend to non-disciplinary work like teacher evaluations and student assessments.
2. Between August and February, working together closely, the principal and staff have led three coordinated initiatives to re-organize English language arts (ELA) instruction and raise student reading performance. IIT members observed each project in action. These included the early stages of effective implementation of tier one core daily instruction for each student, a targeted tier three intervention for the 10 percent of readers in each grade level who are struggling the most, and a schoolwide data system through which staff now create reading groups based on highly differentiated, well-defined student strengths and challenges, and track student performance using multiple measures.
3. In the fall, the principal re-organized indoor recess to increase safety, reduce the likelihood of disruption, and make better use of the building as a learning resource. To alleviate over-crowding and reduce conflict during indoor recess, the principal worked with the building leadership team to redeploy staff into classrooms and other parts of the building, reducing the concentration of students in any one location. Staff stated that indoor recess is calmer now and that this has positively impacted student behavior after lunch.
4. The principal and the building leadership team have established an effective working relationship and a collaborative approach to the leadership and management of the school. The building leadership team includes classroom and reading teachers, an instructional coach, an interventionist, the engagement dean, parent and family engagement staff, and a social worker. In addition to its work on the literacy initiatives detailed above, this collaboration co-developed the 2018-19 School Comprehensive Educational Plan (SCEP) and has worked on the integration of student social and emotional supports.

Areas Of Need To Be Addressed For Long-Term Success

Systems for Improvement

- **The school leader and the building leadership team should establish a system to guide the routine use of academically productive talk in classrooms, which is a core priority of the district and part of the 2018-19 SCEP.** The IIT found that while the school leader conducts regular walkthroughs and provides formative feedback to teachers, he should also make academically productive talk a core focus of his observation and feedback. The principal and the building leadership team shared that they are in the process of developing a new set of professional development (PD) trainings to offer during the schools' twice-weekly professional learning community (PLC) sessions. However, the IIT found that most teachers need to implement academically productive talk into their instruction.
- **The principal and staff will need to develop a comprehensive plan to support the social and emotional needs of students.** The principal, staff, and parents all shared with the IIT that many students have experienced trauma, and struggle with their emotions and behavior. The IIT observed the principal repeatedly checking in with students who are facing challenges in order to avert problems and to diffuse minor issues, a practice that he maintains with approximately 50 students. The 2018-19 SCEP calls for aligning four major initiatives already underway in the school, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Responsive Classroom, Trauma Sensitive Schools, and Mind UP. Multiple incremental steps are underway, including proactive daily interactions with struggling students, improvements to indoor recess, and a new video presentation prepared by teachers and social workers to establish norms of behavior in the cafeteria. The school should identify a single, cohesive plan to meet student social and emotional needs, including these and other action steps.
- **In addition to the core academic system of tier one instruction and tier three intervention block programs, there must also be a coherent curriculum for reading.** During classroom visits, teachers were observed using multiple reading curricula, including Foundations, Leveled Literacy Intervention, and Words their Way. When asked, both the principal and teachers stated that while they use a range of options to support reading instruction, they need to develop a more coherent and intentional curriculum.

Leadership and Organization at the School

- **The principal and the building leadership team will need to develop and communicate a clear focus on the urgency to improve student academic achievement.** Despite hearing staff in multiple roles express strong feelings of caring for students and eagerness to pursue new instructional and professional development (PD) work, the IIT heard few educators expressing a sense of urgency. One exception to this pattern was the principal, who stressed to the IIT that students require greater academic success immediately, and worried that the school lacked a common culture of urgent expectations for achieving rapid, sustained improvement. The IIT found that the school leader will need to communicate this sense of urgency in a clear way to his staff, parents, and students.
- **School leaders must develop a coherent program of PD.** Teachers shared with the IIT their need for PD that incorporates in-depth, hands-on, classroom-based practice, as well as opportunities for discussion and reflection with peers. The principal and the building leadership team are jointly developing a comprehensive program of PD through a newly instituted, twice-weekly PLC. The principal described their focus as including

common expectations and universal practices, the use of data to inform instruction, accountable talk, a social and emotional curriculum, and literacy across the curriculum. In order to ensure high rates of engagement and ownership of staff, the building leadership team is involving teachers in developing PD sessions. The IIT found that there is still a need for a more comprehensive PD plan.

- **While a frequent observer of teaching practices in the school, the principal should fully assert his instructional leadership.** The school leader reported that he deliberately adopted a listening stance, observing practices in all classrooms for the first portion of the school year and both he and staff said he is present in every classroom each week. Teachers reported that although they see the principal frequently in their classrooms, they have not received extensive feedback. Having taken the time to be a respectful observer and learner about the school, he recently began conducting formal post-observation conferences. In order to improve academic outcomes as rapidly as possible, the principal must accelerate these efforts, and begin to challenge and support teachers regularly, with challenging, supportive feedback designed to help them to reflect on and improve their practice.
- **The principal will need to access the many supports available to teachers and school leaders from the central office of the district.** The IIT learned through several exchanges between the principal and the district representative that a number of sources of district support are available to both the principal and to school staff. These include support for developing the practice of accountable talk, resources on student conduct and behavior, and staff training in specific areas of curriculum. Further, the IIT learned from both the principal and the IIT district representative that there are central office resource people, such as the Director of Planning and Accountability, who are prepared to provide additional strategic support and collaborative planning opportunities to the school leader. While it is wise to choose carefully among such options, in the future, the principal should devise more ways to partner effectively with the district to choose among, and leverage, key strategic resources.
- **The principal and staff will need to develop a transparent, inclusive planning process for the coming school year, in an effort to raise staff ownership and positively impact student learning.** The principal has begun his own work on the FY20 budget, master schedule, and plan, but he reported to the IIT that he will need to introduce this early thinking to his staff leaders. Without an inclusive approach that brings staff and other stakeholders to the planning table, the school leader will run the risk of having weaker levels of participation and less shared ownership of the coming year's work. Having shown their capacity to work collaboratively, the principal and the building leadership team should work to plan for the re-organization of key school practices, based on a shared analysis of how to maximize student learning.

Learning at the School

- **Teachers need to ask higher-order questions and engage students in discussion.** During classroom visits, the IIT found that most teacher questions required recall and recognition that did not promote higher-order thinking skills. During whole group and small group instruction, students were not challenged and had limited opportunities to engage in meaningful thought or discussion. In interviews with the team, students and parents stated that student work needs to be more challenging. Several teachers used small group work to differentiate instruction with rigorous curricular content. Further, they fostered high levels of student engagement, evidenced by students working on the board, taking part in animated small group discussions and debates, and demonstrating clear command of subject matter. However, this was not typical across the school.

- **The school will need to have a coherent approach to its curriculum for both tier one core instruction and tier three interventions and should have a plan for the delivery of tier two interventions.** The IIT observed the use of a wide range of different unrelated curricula in the school’s tier one core instruction and tier three intervention blocks. However, none of the plans reviewed by the IIT identified or made commitments to tier two interventions, which the school leader cited as being a necessary part of the process. In the future, the principal and building leadership team should work to create a coherent and high-quality curriculum in all three tiers of instruction.
- **The school should offer enrichment to students who are achieving at the higher academic levels.** Staff stated that enrichment programming, specifically for students who are achieving at high levels, is meant to be a part of the curriculum of the school but does not take place regularly. No students or parents reported the existence of enrichment and no teaching of enrichment was observed by the IIT during classroom visits.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Areas of Need and Ideas for Improvement

- **Some students stated that bullying and fighting occur at school and have a negative impact on them.** Several students shared with the IIT instances of bullying and altercations that they had to contend with and how this has impacted their feelings and their ability to be successful at school.
- **Students suggested that staff develop ways to help students make new friends, particularly shy students, students new to the school, or lonely students.** In an interview with IIT, students suggested that the school should designate a spot on the playground where any student can go to find a playmate. They called it a Buddy Bench, and they thought that it would be a good way to include any child who is feeling lonely or left out, and a fun way for all students to be supportive of each other.
- **Students and staff stated that more recess is needed for students.** Students shared with the team that school would be more fun if it provided more time for them to play with their friends. In interviews, two teachers also stated that they believe students need more recess time. They observed that students often get restless, unfocused, or irritable if they have not had an adequate chance to exercise and to get some fresh air and suggested that adding additional opportunities for recess would improve student success.
- **Parents stated that they were frustrated and confused by differing expectations for both home and school work across classrooms and grade levels.** One parent described how her younger child routinely had a substantial volume of homework each night, while her older child rarely had any homework at all. Parents stated that they believe teachers have different philosophies on homework and that this leads to confusion and concern among students and parents, both about differing expectations and workloads and about the risk that students would either be overworked or not challenged enough.